

Rabbi David E. Levy
HaYom Harat Olam: A Day Pregnant with Possibilities
Rosh Hashanah 5780

I wouldn't want to spend time with Jack Peterson. Jack has a Powerpoint presentation he likes to refer to as "his credentials as a certifiable loser." In middle school, a girl sat next to him on the bus and said: "I knew someone who was pretty ugly once, but he could be happy." And for a while Jack thought he could be happy, too. Then his first relationship ended after his girlfriend tried to strangle him and he was arrested by the police. Humiliated, embarrassed, and enraged Jack went looking for a place he could unload all his negative feelings, where he could feel heard and accepted.

And that's when he discovered Incels.me, a message board for the Involuntary Celebrate movement, or Incel for short. There he found people who broke him down, and built him back up. The men on this website demean and objectify women and blame them for their negative self-perception. Incels.me taught Jack that he was the victim, and the way to combat anxiety and rage was to claim power over women.

In 2018, two members of Incel executed fatal terrorist attacks, one in Toronto and the other in Sante Fe.¹ Following the attacks, reporter Masha Gessen reflected: "As with other kinds of terrorism, the cycle is self-perpetuating: men reach for violence to compensate for their sense of powerlessness, public recognition of their horrifying might inflates their sense of importance, inspiring others to follow suit, and the violence and the fear escalate in concert."²

Powerlessness is not unique to terrorists or angry men on message boards: each of us has at times felt powerless between last Rosh Hashanah and this one, and in so many moments throughout our lives. It has not incited us to such a degree that we would murder or maim, but powerlessness is a part of the human condition. The story of Hannah, our Haftarah for tomorrow is a tale of powerlessness but with a happier end: Hannah despairs that she's barren, and will never have a child. She prays and prays, and her prayers are

¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=712276022>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/after-the-santa-fe-shooting-we-still-resist-the-idea-of-the-ordinary-terrorist>

answered: G-d gives her Samuel, meaning “G-d hears.” **Her** response to powerlessness is prayer, and to hope that her life may change for the better. And it does.

Those of us who have become parents know that in having her son, Hannah did not end her powerlessness, but rather entered a new stage of powerlessness, best described by novelist Elizabeth Stone: “Making the decision to have a child - it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”³

As Kate and I sat in the NICU, Neo-Natal Intensive Care Unit, next to Ezra, our adorable third son whom we adopted this past August in Huntington, West Virginia, we saw our hearts lying there in an isolette. We had found his birth mother in July, and each day asked ourselves: is this real? Will she let us adopt her baby? Or when her due date comes around--which was supposed to be today, of all days-- will she call us to say she’s changed her mind? But no: we were reminded how powerless we were in a way we hadn’t anticipated, when she called us on August 4th, while she was being prepped for an emergency c-section, and asked us how soon we could get there to welcome Ezra into our home and our hearts.

A day later we drove 9 hours to meet our new son. Upon arrival, we were welcomed by the Ronald McDonald house, that wonderful organization that supports families who have a child in the hospital. As we checked in, anxious to meet our son, they asked us how we were doing after such a long trip from New York. It was quite a schlep Kate quickly replied. I don’t know if I can’t adequately describe the reaction of those lovely women when they heard the word Schlep. A mixture of befuddlement and amusement, as they tried it out themselves, throughout our remaining conversation, as we awkwardly smiled.

Once we finally arrived at the NICU, there was nothing we could do but wait: Ezra needed time to grow. Nothing to do but try to find calm in the chaos of doctors, care for our older sons, and embrace the unknown. Full to the brim with anxiety, I sat in West Virginia for weeks: lucky to hold him once a day, but more often just waiting for him to tip the scale at 5 pounds so he could come home.

I believe there are two experiences of powerlessness: one is the kind where we tell ourselves we are unworthy, unlovable, and we want so badly to feel seen and

³ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/251288.Elizabeth_Stone

acknowledged. It's also the anxiety of watching a loved one in a hospital, feeling helpless to do anything. The other is the institutional racism, misogyny, prejudice and countless ways that our world cuts down the other, that for two millenia was a part of our Jewish story. What I want us to consider tonight is the former: where situations conspire to push us into negative self perception.

In such moments, how we choose to respond is crucial to our well-being. We can reframe the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what our lives mean. As Philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, argues: "The truly unique trait of [homo-]Sapiens is our ability to create and believe fiction. All other animals use their communication system to describe reality. We use our communication system to create new realities."⁴ As Human beings we live in a dual reality: the objective reality of the natural world, and the imagined reality of the story we tell ourselves.⁵

Harari's idea is in line with the emerging field of Positive Psychology, which teaches that human beings have the capacity not only to survive, but to thrive, and that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, matter: that we have far greater control of our happiness and well-being than we think. Scholars claim that 50% of our happiness comes from our genetics. Only 10% is a product of our circumstances. So what accounts for the remaining 40%? Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky maintains: "...[T]he key to happiness lies not in changing our genetic makeup (which is impossible) and not in changing our circumstances (...which is usually impractical), but in our daily intentional activities. With this in mind...[we have 40 percent]... within our ability to control...[with]...opportunities to increase or decrease our happiness levels through what we do in our daily lives and how we think..."⁶ Imagine that: 40% of our happiness is about the story we tell ourselves.

The hardest thing to reconcile about this view of happiness is that only 10% is defined by circumstances. I've had knee surgery for a torn meniscus; I've stood under the

⁴ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-makes-humans-different-fiction-and-cooperation-180953986/#dWij4ilboIIDF7hD.99>

⁵ <https://www.ynharari.com/topic/power-and-imagination/>

⁶ — The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want by Sonja Lyubomirsky

<http://a.co/hcrsAut>

chuppah with Kate; and I've held my sons in my arms. These events feel so monumental I thought they would each have a much larger lasting impact on me and my overall well being. Yet, these life events only count toward 10% of my overall happiness. We find the answer in the aggregation: over the course of time, our bodies and minds adapt to the highs and lows of life. We eventually return to a "set point" of baseline well-being that is defined by the **other** 90%: our biology and the story we tell ourselves. Researchers call this the Hedonic Adaptation.

This is in many ways a gift: we don't assume that time heals all wounds, but we do appreciate that time changes our relationship to our experiences as they become memories. I tell every wedding couple I work with that their wedding will be beautiful, and will be a high point. And in the same breath, I say that premarital counseling will give them tools to ensure that their marriage is just as beautiful. It is normal for us to stop appreciating the special gift our partner is in our lives, to stop noticing the small and big ways they make our lives better. We need reminders and tools to help us appreciate our spouses long after the honeymoon is over, and those help us preserve the 40% of our happiness which is within our control.

Our ability to influence that 40% is the key to combat the kind of powerlessness which is a state of mind, one that challenges us to tell a more positive story about ourselves. As Milton reflected in *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." Jack Peterson's internal narrative is curated in his powerpoint presentation. He told himself that reclaiming power over women would make him happy. I told myself that the anxiety of tending to my son in the NICU would lead to great joy.

We have numerous tools to help train our minds and adapt our perspective, and I'm quick to say that not every tool is right for every person. Lyubomrsky shares 12 activities that we can incorporate into our daily lives. All of these are based in neuroscience and each of them are found in our Jewish tradition. Some of these I know you've heard before such as Expressing Gratitude, Savoring Life's Joys, and Taking Care of your body, in Hebrew, *Hakarat Hatov*, *Simchah* and *Kedushat HaGuf*.

But, I was drawn to the only activity on her list, that is written in the negative: Avoid social comparison. We're all guilty of this aren't we? How many of us have gone on social

media to ensure that everyone knows we are “living our best lives” and to compare our “best lives” to others? That moment when we login and see a deluge of everyone’s vacation pictures, and we decided to do something more low key this year. The picture of everyone having fun at a Bat Mitzvah, that we weren’t invited to. The college acceptance celebrations, when we are still waitlisted. The 90th birthday party when we’ve just lost a loved one.

The grass will always be greener for someone else, or so we think. But comparing ourselves to others doesn’t make us feel better, science shows it only hurts. The ethics of our fathers remind us of this truth: “Who is rich? One who rejoices in their lot, as it is said: ‘You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper.’”⁷

Tomorrow morning we will say Hayom Harat Olam: a prayer that speaks to the essence of Rosh Hashanah: that it is a day pregnant with possibilities. Our tradition teaches that every day the world is created anew, but on Rosh Hashanah, all of 5780 is resplendent before us: full of options and opportunities.

Hayom Harat Olam: within each of us is a chance to tell a different story about our year to come, and in so doing change our future.

Hayom Harat Olam: we can reframe our narrative, not just by willing it so, but by being kinder, nurturing relationships, and creating space for forgiveness in all its facets.

HaYom Harat Olam: we can tell ourselves a better story this year.

⁷ (Psalms 128:2), Pirkei Avot 4:1